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# Backwards in High Heels: Examining the Careers and Artistic Contributions of Fred Astaire's Female Dance Partners

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BACKWARDS IN HIGH HEELS: EXAMINING THE CAREERS AND ARTISTIC  
CONTRIBUTION OF FRED ASTAIRE'S FEMALE DANCE PARTNERS

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degrees Bachelor of Fine Arts and Bachelor of Science with  
Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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2015

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## ABSTRACT

This project examines the careers and contributions of three of Fred Astaire's female dancing partners during the golden age of movie musicals: Ginger Rogers, Vera- Ellen, and Cyd Charisse. These women receive less recognition than their male co-star, due in part to the political and social environment from the 1930s to the 1950s in America, sexism and competition within Hollywood, and personal obstacles. Rogers, Vera-Ellen, and Charisse are all important as individual performers as well as for the part they played in enhancing Astaire's legacy. My goal is to bring these women back into the musical theatre narrative in a compact and easily accessible form for high school and university theatre and dance students. Each chapter includes a brief biography of each dancer, commentary on the obstacles they faced, and contributions they made to theatre, dance, and film including an analysis of two dance numbers, at least one with Astaire. A visual glossary is also included to help readers understand the dance terminology used in the analysis sections.

Keywords: Ginger Rogers, Vera-Ellen, Cyd Charisse, Fred Astaire, Dance, Musical Theatre

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This project would not have been possible without the help, knowledge, and encouragement of many people. I am grateful first and foremost to Dr. Michelle Dvoskin, my CE/T advisor, for her insightful critique and help in shaping my argument, believing there was something important enough to say at the heart of my ramblings, constant encouragement, and supply of York mints. Many thanks to Dr. Julie Lyn Barber and Dr. Dana Bradley for agreeing to step in as my second and third readers.

I would like to thank the professors, directors, and choreographers who first introduced me to Ginger Rogers, Vera-Ellen, Cyd Charisse, and their peers. Thank you to guest artist Jeremy Benton, whose Musical Theatre Styles class during my freshman year fostered my interest in the stars of golden age movie musicals. I would also like to acknowledge those directors, choreographers, and performers keeping those dance styles alive today.

Finally, many thanks to my family and friends who have kept me sane through this process and pushed me to not give up.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Vita.....	iv
Chapters:	
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Ginger Rogers.....	11
3. Vera-Ellen.....	23
4. Cyd Charisse.....	34
5. Conclusion.....	45
Bibliography.....	47
Appendices:	
Appendix A.....	52
Appendix B.....	54

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“Sure [Fred Astaire] was great, but don’t forget Ginger Rogers did everything he did backwards...and in high heels!”<sup>1</sup>

Search the web for the greatest dancers of all time and in nearly every result you’ll find the name “Fred Astaire” listed. He’s often accompanied by Mikhail Baryshnikov (1948-), Vaslav Nijinsky (1889-1950), Gene Kelly (1912-1996), even Michael Jackson (1958-2009). Occasionally there will be a listing of “Fred Astaire *and* Ginger Rogers” as a dancing unit, an inseparable partnership. Yet you will rarely find any of Astaire’s female partners included on such lists as individual performers. In fact, the number of male dancers recognized far outnumbers the females. Anna Pavlova (1881-1931), Martha Graham (1894-1991), and Josephine Baker (1906-1975) show up the most but where are the names of Cyd Charisse (1922-2008), Vera-Ellen (1921-1981), Leslie Caron (1931-), and Barrie Chase (1933-)? Despite having as extensive and impressive credits, these women do not receive the same recognition and respect as Fred Astaire.

At a “time when attention is being given to women’s achievements as well as obstacles which have hindered these accomplishments from being more plentiful and

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<sup>1</sup>Thaves, Bob. “Frank and Ernest.” Comic strip. NEA, Inc., 1982. Web.



prominent,”<sup>2</sup> it is fitting to bring Astaire’s female partners back into the narrative. While their talents and importance have not gone completely unnoticed by scholars, their contributions are not frequently taught in dance or musical theatre programs. As both a former Dance major at a performing arts high school and current Musical Theatre major and Dance minor at Western Kentucky University, my knowledge of these women stems almost entirely from research outside of the classroom. If not for my own personal interest and a guest professor who specialized in golden age tap, I would graduate college without learning about any of Astaire’s female partners. I find this lack of curriculum unfortunate and consider it a disservice to those students pursuing performing post-graduation. First of all, it is important for students to have some base knowledge of important performers who have come before them. Secondly, the dance styles of Astaire, Rogers, Vera-Ellen, Charisse, and their peers are still popular in the world of musical theatre today. Current Broadway, Off-Broadway, and touring shows utilizing their styles include *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, *An American in Paris*, *Dames at Sea*, and *White Christmas*, many of which are stage adaptations of golden age movie musicals. Familiarity with the original performers of these shows and specifics of their dance styles is vital for success within these shows. These movement styles are even referenced and incorporated into more contemporary musicals. In fact, with the popularity of shows like *Hamilton* and *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, a number of biography musicals are being workshopped including *Backwards in High Heels: The Ginger Musical*, which most recently ran at the Westchester Broadway Theatre from August 13 to September 20,

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<sup>2</sup> Hanna, Judith Lynne. *Dance, Sex, and Gender*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988. xv. Print.

2015.<sup>3</sup> This show centers on Ginger Rogers, one of Astaire's most famous partners, and is the first step in bringing these women back into the minds of audiences.

Since it is beyond the scope of this project to include a full assessment of each of Astaire's partners and why the gap in recognition between female and male performers exists, this paper explores the lives and careers of three of Astaire's co-stars. The three performers discussed are Ginger Rogers, Vera-Ellen, and Cyd Charisse, who each worked with Astaire on two or more films. I have chosen to focus on Rogers, Vera-Ellen, and Charisse due to both a personal interest in their work and the fact that they are typically considered to be dancers first and foremost. While all three have a range of talents both within and beyond dancing, they are strong dancers who could match (or even exceed) Astaire's abilities. The following sections include a brief biography of each dancer, commentary on the obstacles they faced, and contributions they made to theatre, dance, and film. The ultimate goal of this paper is therefore to make information about Ginger Rogers, Vera-Ellen, Cyd Charisse more accessible to current high school and university students with at least elementary knowledge of theatre and dance.

Since dance and performance in general is a visual medium, it is difficult to capture the essence of these performers on the page. I would highly suggest viewing clips of their films to get a better sense of each woman's style and the way her performance and movement alters depending on her partner and character. In Appendix A I have included a list of dance numbers from Rogers, Vera-Ellen, and Charisse's filmography

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<sup>3</sup> "Backwards in High Heels." *Westchester Broadway Theatre*. Westchester Broadway Theatre, 2015. Web.

that I recommend viewing. Initially I had also intended to include filmed clips of myself replicating their dance numbers in order to give a sense of each performer's style and body of work. However, I greatly underestimated the difficulty of this undertaking. Not only did I struggle significantly with notating and learning their choreography from watching film clips, but my dancing ability, particularly tap, is far inferior to any of these artists. The ease with which they perform masks the difficulty of their steps. Even their poise and natural styles of movement are a struggle to replicate. While I lack the natural talent Rogers, Vera-Ellen, and Charisse possessed, I have taken dance lessons for years. My inability to perform their routines at this late point in my training furthers my point that these women's dance and performance skills are underappreciated. I believe musical theatre and dance students would benefit from working on their routines in class to better prepare them for a performing career. In lieu of a personal performance, I have recorded the dance steps included in this paper and defined in the glossary in Appendix B, using the American Ballet Theatre's terminology primarily. At the end of this visual glossary is a short golden age tap combination to give an idea of how the tap steps are put together to create a combination like Astaire and his partners might have performed.

Examining the difference in recognition, the issue of the male star being more remembered than his female co-stars is not limited to Astaire by any means; rather it is a persistent phenomenon both then and now. In one respect, it has to do with the disproportionate number of female dancers to males. Females were used to "dress a

scene” more often and in greater numbers than men.<sup>4</sup> For example, Busby Berkeley’s famous style always revolved around hundreds of chorus girls, most of whom never spoke. They were used as nameless decorations and to create intricate formations. The women were treated as objects to be manipulated rather than individual living beings. While there were male ensembles, they were rarely used in this manner.

There is a curious relationship between gender and performance. Western theatre and dance used to be male dominated art forms. From ancient Greece to Shakespeare’s day, it was not uncommon for men to perform all the parts, including female roles. Theatre was considered a job for men. Dance was perhaps not as exclusive, as males and females both danced. In fact, the birth of classical ballet is attributed in part to French King Louis XIV, also called The Sun King. He was a dancer himself who popularized court ballets and established the first ballet school, the Académie Royale de Danse.<sup>5</sup> And yet, at some point after the time of King Louis XIV’s court, the acceptance of male dancers changed. Dance was no longer considered masculine and male dancers were often assumed to be homosexual. The “...‘feminization’ of theatrical dance in the west” remains a problem today and as a result there were and are fewer male dancers.<sup>6</sup> In fact, a lot of emphasis is placed on Astaire, Kelly, and other male performers’ masculinity. Kelly’s muscular build and strength were highlighted in his dancing and even the clothing he wore. He “capitalized on his masculine image in his films by wearing tight

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<sup>4</sup> Theatre term for the staging of a scene; refers in this case to how chorus women were used as props rather than performers to make a specific stage picture.

<sup>5</sup> “Louis XIV and the Birth of Classical Ballet.” *California Ballet*. California Ballet, 24 May 2010. Web.

<sup>6</sup> Risner, Doug. “When Boys Dance: Moving Masculinities and Cultural Resistance in Dance Training and Education.” *dance and the Child international* (2009). ResearchGate, 30 Jul. 2014. Web.

muscleman T-shirts and leotard-tight pants that drew attention to his rippling biceps, abdominals, groin, and thighs.”<sup>7</sup> Astaire’s masculinity was less overt. He was portrayed as a mischievous but lovable gentleman, rarely seen without a bright scarf or his classic top hat and tails. The movies Astaire and Kelly starred in always focused on a heterosexual romantic plot in which they typically got the girl. Yet, while male dancers struggled to prove their masculinity to the public, within the dance world they still received more freedom and praise than female dancers. There are far more female dancers than male but far fewer female choreographers and artistic directors. Using British ballet as an example, women may historically run ballet schools but “are rarely, if ever, invited to the choreographic high table. They are permitted responsibility, in other words, but not creative power.”<sup>8</sup> Females are given less power in the dance world, something created and reinforced by society’s gender roles. Even for those women focused only on performing, not creating, there is more competition for roles, so fewer female dancers make it to the star level Astaire and Kelly achieved.

Another probable explanation for the discrepancy between recognition of male and female dancers that should be explored further can be found in the political and social environment of the time. Movie musicals rose in popularity around the time of World War II, as the golden age of movie musicals is considered to be from the 1930s through about the 1950s. As many men were drafted to fight, fewer male entertainers were left available. Additionally, while the turn of the century improved social conditions

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<sup>7</sup> Hill, Constance Valis. *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 158. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Jennings, Luke. “Sexism in dance: where are all the female choreographers?” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, Limited, 28 Apr. 2013. Web.

for white women in the United States after being granted the right to vote in 1920, by the 1950s strict traditional gender roles were reinstated. A woman was expected to marry and take care of her family and home first and foremost. Career women like Rogers and Vera-Allen, both of whom divorced in part to focus on their careers, were not lauded by the more conservative society. Beyond these potential reasons, a lot of it comes down to happenstance. There is no recipe for fame. Some performers are remembered and some are not. This does not necessarily reflect talent or contributions to their field.

Since the focus of this paper is primarily three of Astaire's partners, it only seems fair that we look a little closer at the life and the contributions of the man himself. Born Frederick Austerlitz on May 10, 1899 in Omaha, Nebraska, Fred Astaire was a renowned dancer, actor, singer, and choreographer who achieved fame during the golden age of movie musicals. He began performing in vaudeville with his sister Adele in 1906. The pair then moved to the Broadway stage in 1917 with *Over the Top*, a musical revue.<sup>9</sup> Astaire went on to perform in twelve Broadway productions until 1933, including *Funny Face*, *The Band Wagon*, and *Gay Divorcée*, which were later adapted into films starring Astaire. Around this time Adele retired from show business, leaving Fred Astaire without a partner. In 1933 he married Phyllis Livingston Potter and moved on to Hollywood.<sup>10</sup> His first big film was *Flying Down to Rio* (1933) with RKO Pictures, which kicked off his ten film partnership with Ginger Rogers.

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<sup>9</sup> "Fred Astaire." *IBDb*. The Broadway League, 2015. Web.

<sup>10</sup> Mueller, John. "Astaire, Fred." *American National Biography Online*. Oxford University Press, Feb. 2000. Web.

Astaire went on to appear in around fifty television and film roles, as well as hosting documentaries like *That's Entertainment*.<sup>11</sup> Astaire was nominated for and won a significant number of awards for these roles, including Golden Globe Awards, Emmy Awards, an honorary Academy Award, and one of the first Kennedy Center Honors. In 1982, the Fred and Adele Astaire Awards were established to recognize “outstanding achievement in dance on Broadway each season.”<sup>12</sup> Astaire stopped dancing around 1970, when he was over the age of 70.<sup>13</sup> He continued to act in smaller roles, the last of which was *Ghost Story* in 1981. Fred Astaire died of pneumonia at age 88 on June 22, 1987 in Los Angeles, California.

Considered “the greatest dancer in the world”<sup>14</sup> by the famous choreographer George Balanchine, Astaire was one of the most popular dancers of his time and his legacy continues today. Astaire is perhaps best known for his tap and ballroom dancing, though ballet and jazz also heavily influenced his style. It should be noted that while Astaire increased the popularity of tap dancing through his films, its roots lie in African-American culture. Due to his ethnicity, charisma, and skill, however, he helped to make “dancing more than respectable in a country with a Puritan heritage.”<sup>15</sup> Astaire was an infamous perfectionist and rehearsed dance numbers for days or even weeks before filming. To survive his grueling rehearsals and keep up with the sheer genius of his

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<sup>11</sup> “Fred Astaire.” *IMDb*. IMDb.com, Inc., 2015. Web.

<sup>12</sup> “About the Awards.” *The Astaire Awards*. The Douglas Watt Family Fund for the Performing Arts, n.d. Web.

<sup>13</sup> “Fred Astaire.” *Reel Classics*. Reel Classics, LLC, 19 Oct. 2010. Web.

<sup>14</sup> Shepard, Richard F. “Fred Astaire, the Ultimate Dancer, Dies: Fred Astaire Dies at 88; A Synonym for Suavity.” *The New York Times*. New York Times, 23 Jun. 1987: A1. *ProQuest*. Web.

<sup>15</sup> Kisselgoff, Anna. “Dance View; Fred Astaire perfected a new art form.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 28 Jun. 1987. Web.

choreography and performance capabilities, “you had to be the top of the line to dance with [Fred Astaire] in the first place.”<sup>16</sup>

Apart from his tremendous talent, Astaire’s greatest contribution was the adaptation of dance for film. Richard Barrios writes that “dance on film, pre-Astaire, had been finite and self-contained, more for groups than solos or duets, a toilsome thing not connected with life or emotion or anything other than exertion.”<sup>17</sup> There is some argument that Astaire was integrating dance numbers into both Broadway and film musicals before anyone else. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* (1943) is typically considered to be the first fully integrated musical<sup>18</sup> with “songs and dances that propel the plot, set a specific mood, reflect a situation, and depict a moment in a character’s development.”<sup>19</sup> It featured narrative use of several dance styles, including the famous dream ballet section choreographed by Agnes de Mille. While perhaps not the first, Astaire’s work was part of the movement toward this integration. John Mueller classifies six levels of integration in his article “Fred Astaire and the Integrated Musical,” the highest of which “advance the plot by their content” so that the absence of such numbers from the story would be noticeable.<sup>20</sup> Not all of Astaire’s choreography fits this description; there are plenty of unintegrated dance numbers that are designed more for entertainment than contribution to the plot. Two numbers that Mueller considers fully

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<sup>16</sup> Levinson, Peter J. *Puttin’ On the Ritz*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2009. 269. Print.

<sup>17</sup> Barrios, Richard. *Dangerous Rhythm: Why Movie Musicals Matter*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Print.

<sup>18</sup> In integrated musicals, the songs and dances further the plot

<sup>19</sup> Kislán, Richard. *The Musical: A Look at American Musical Theater*. New York: Applause, 1995. 140-141. Print.

<sup>20</sup> Mueller, John. “Fred Astaire and the Integrated Musical.” *Cinema Journal* 24.1 (1984): 28-40. *JSTOR*. Web.



integrated are “Night and Day” with Ginger Rogers and “Dancing in the Dark” with Cyd Charisse, both of which will be discussed later in this paper. Still, much of Astaire’s work can be viewed as “dance films with plots – not story films that contain dances,”<sup>21</sup> such is the importance of movement to Astaire.

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<sup>21</sup> Kisselgoff, Anna. “Dance View; Fred Astaire perfected a new art form.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 28 Jun. 1987. Web.

## CHAPTER 2

### GINGER ROGERS

Of the three women I'm focusing on, Ginger Rogers is the most well-known of Fred Astaire's partners. Rogers was born Virginia Katherine McMath on July 16, 1911 in Independence, Missouri. She had a colorful childhood during which her father, William Eddins McMath, who had separated from Rogers' mother, kidnapped his infant daughter. Rogers was promptly rescued by her mother, Lela Owens McMath, with whom she was very close. Lela divorced William Eddins McMath and married John Rogers nine years later, from whom Ginger Rogers received her surname. Rogers' autobiography *Ginger: My Story* is full of charming anecdotes about her extended family and childhood that provide excellent insight into her mother's character and, subsequently, Rogers' own. Lela, called Lelee by her daughter, was very present throughout Rogers' life and career. She acted as Rogers' manager and support system. Lela even made an appearance in *The Major and the Minor* (1942) as Rogers' on-screen mother. Both were also very religious, identifying as Christian Science Practitioners. Beyond her family, Rogers' love life was often in the media as she had friendships and romantic relationships with well-known actors and composers, including Astaire prior to their film partnership. She was married

and divorced five times between 1929 and 1971 to Jack Pepper, Lew Ayers, Jack Briggs, Jacques Bergerac, and William Marshall, respectively.<sup>22</sup>

Rogers began dancing lessons during high school.<sup>23</sup> Her career started when she won a Charleston contest in Texas and the prize was four weeks of appearances on the Interstate Theatre Circuit. Those appearances led to more work along the vaudeville circuit and eventually to shows on Broadway. Her first booking was *Top Speed* in 1929, followed by *Girl Crazy* with Ethel Merman in 1930.<sup>24</sup> During her time on Broadway, she met Fred Astaire. However it would not be until 1933 that they worked on a film together.

Rogers' foray into film began in 1929 with a series of short films.<sup>25</sup> She made a total of ten films in 1933, including *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* directed by Busby Berkeley and her first Astaire collaboration *Flying Down to Rio*. According to John Kobal, "Ginger...had actually decided to give up making musicals when offered the job with Astaire... She accepted *Flying Down to Rio*, expecting it to be little more than a one-time thing. She told Astaire at the time, 'I don't want to do any more musicals, but I guess it'll turn out all right; anyway, we'll have some fun!' Thus began one of the great partnerships in the movies."<sup>26</sup> The pair played supporting roles in *Flying Down to Rio* but ended up stealing

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<sup>22</sup> "Ginger Rogers." *Turner Classic Movies*. Turner Entertainment Networks, Inc., 2015. Web.

<sup>23</sup> "Ginger Rogers." *Turner Classic Movies*. Turner Entertainment Networks, Inc., 2015. Web.

<sup>24</sup> "Ginger Rogers." *IBDb*. The Broadway League, 2015. Web.

<sup>25</sup> "Ginger Rogers." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, Inc., 2015. Web.

<sup>26</sup> Kobal, John. *Gotta Sing, Gotta Dance: A Pictorial History of Film Musicals*. New York: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited, 1971. 139. Print.

the show. They then proceeded to star in the following nine films they made together over the course of sixteen years.

Classic as those Astaire-Rogers movies are, they make up a very small percentage of Rogers' filmography. Her IMDB page boasts 92 television and film credits spanning several different genres, most after her collaboration with Astaire had ended. As Sarah Kaufman muses, "In looking at Rogers in her own right, I find myself wondering what a Fredless life would have been like for her. As much as she is identified with Astaire, she had the multiple gifts and the drive to have succeeded without him."<sup>27</sup> And she did, in fact, succeed without him. Rogers immediately received attention in 1930 for her first full-length film *Young Man of Manhattan* with her role as a flapper, whose line "Cigarette me, big boy!" became a popular American phrase.<sup>28</sup> While much of her work, in the early part of her career particularly, took advantage of her singing and dancing skills, Rogers was an accomplished actress in non-musical roles as well. She won the 1940 Academy Award for Best Actress for the title role in *Kitty Foyle*. Later in her career Rogers made her livelihood in the title role in *Hello Dolly!* She took over for 18 months of the 1965 Broadway run after Carol Channing departed the production. She reprised this role in the national tour and various regional productions.<sup>29</sup>

Despite her body of work, "Rogers is primarily recognized as a singing and dancing musical comedy star and secondarily as a dramatic actress," something I do not

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<sup>27</sup> Kaufman, Sarah. "Ginger Rogers, consistently leading." *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 13 Feb. 2011. *ProQuest*. Web.

<sup>28</sup> "Biography." *Ginger Rogers: The Official Site*. The First Church of Christ, Scientist, n.d. Web.

<sup>29</sup> "Biography." *Ginger Rogers: The Official Site*. The First Church of Christ, Scientist, n.d. Web.

view as inherently negative.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately there are “long-standing, class-based prejudices about the superiority of art to entertainment” and film, particularly musical comedy on film, falls into the latter category.<sup>31</sup> Essentially, movie musicals were readily available, affordable, and popular among the working class. In a world before the cinema, access to the arts had been more elite since performances were limited by the location, length of the run, and ticket prices. The mass production of art through film allowed the lower classes more access. In an effort to retain power, the distinction between *art* and *entertainment* developed, with more accessible, popular theatre and dance labeled as entertainment. A distinction between theatre and musical theatre also developed, as musical theatre often deals with lighter, more “trivial” subjects and is therefore a more popular genre. The public popularity again labels the genre as less legitimate theatre, wherein there is “antagonism between the serious and lively arts.”<sup>32</sup> This division has caused Rogers’ work to be seen as lesser when, in reality, musical comedy is an important art form and Rogers’ performances and contributions to the form deserve praise equal to those actors who made their living performing in serious dramas.

In terms of her dance style, Rogers is mostly known for tap and ballroom dance. She had fairly limited formal training, as her natural talent originally propelled her career. As a result, while Rogers excelled at partnering, she was not the greatest solo dancer. This was due in part to a lack of opportunity. “Astaire’s solos far outnumber Roger’s two

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<sup>30</sup> Brannigan, Erin. *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 142. Print.

<sup>31</sup> Savran, David. “Toward a Historiography of the Popular.” *Theatre Survey* 45.2 (2004): 211-217. *Cambridge Journals*. Web.

<sup>32</sup> Savran, David. *Highbrow/Lowdown*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009. 10. Print.

across the ten films they made together,”<sup>33</sup> both of which were cast-offs of material Astaire did not want. However, Rogers made up for this with her acting ability. Rogers’ acting ability, performance presence, and chemistry with Astaire made their partnership work and allowed the audience to fall in love with the pair. As David Hajdu argues, “Astaire looks better with Rogers than he would ever again look on film, because of the way Rogers looked at him while they sang and danced... she was so skilled an actress that she took the audience in her arms as she fell into Astaire’s. That very skill has ended up devaluing Rogers in the minds of later audiences. Unfairly, I think, she came to be acknowledged almost solely for her ability to enhance Astaire, particularly by bringing much-needed sex appeal to their partnership.”<sup>34</sup> As a team, Astaire and Rogers improved the public popularity of dance and were a bright spot during the Great Depression. Rogers’ dancing career reached its peak in her work with Astaire due to their complementary talents. Much of her work following her partnership with Astaire did not involve as much dancing. This is not to say that Rogers’ career dwindled, it simply took a new direction. Rogers was a true triple threat with strengths as a dancer, singer, and actor who capitalized more on the latter two skills with her later career. Sarah Kaufman explains that Rogers’ career sans Astaire may be less remembered because “she played against the prevailing stereotypes. Ironically, the down-market heroines Rogers

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<sup>33</sup> Brannigan, Erin. *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 148. Print.

<sup>34</sup> Hajdu, David. “How Could We Forget Ginger Rogers?” *New Republic*. The New Republic, 22 Jul. 2011. Web.

championed were all but doomed to slip out of the public consciousness” as traditional women’s films don’t gain respect.<sup>35</sup>

Moving past her theatrical contributions, Rogers took a step forward for female performers as a whole. An independent woman, Rogers “had to fight, scream and storm off the set in hopes of being treated like what she was: the equal of Astaire and the superior of bit-player males who, incredibly, were paid twice as much as she.”<sup>36</sup> In her autobiography she mentions many instances where she had her input ignored in favor of a male colleague or was considered a diva for expecting to be treated like her male co-stars. For example, Rogers had a lot of input in her costumes. She understood their importance as clothing is a technical element that can make or break a performance, especially in dance. Rogers’ costumes complemented both her characters and her dancing; her manipulation of the fabric was choreography in itself. This is evident in *Top Hat*, which is the film set she stormed off of over the feathered dress she wore in “Cheek to Cheek.” Rogers collaborated with dress designer Bernard Newman on a blue satin dress with a low back and adorned with ostrich feathers.<sup>37</sup> It went through the design approval process but on the day of the shoot, director Mark Sandrich and Astaire made a scene over the dress which led to a very tense atmosphere on the *Top Hat* set. Rogers did ultimately wear the dress and it added a lovely extra layer to the dance. Sandrich was among her greatest obstacles in this regard, whom Rogers claimed to have treated her in a

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<sup>35</sup> Kaufman, Sarah. “Ginger Rogers, consistently leading.” *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 13 Feb. 2011. *ProQuest*. Web.

<sup>36</sup> Reich, Howard. “Dancing lady Ginger Rogers tells how it really was in Hollywood in the ‘30s with Fred Astaire and all those producers.” *Chicago Tribune*. Chicago Tribune, 21 Oct. 1991. *ProQuest*. Web.

<sup>37</sup> Rogers, Ginger. *Ginger: My Story*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991. 140. Print.

“downright deprecatory manner” during their films together and suggested she take dancing, singing, and acting lessons despite her making a living off precisely those skills.<sup>38</sup> There were other little instances of sexism throughout Astaire and Rogers’ films. Astaire received top billing above Rogers in every film following *Flying Down to Rio* and even now we refer to the pair as Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, rather than Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. It’s a small thing and perhaps one that did not bother Rogers, but it is worth noting how male actors were often held in higher regard than the women, down to the details. Rogers also dealt with negative media over contract negotiations with RKO in the 1930s. In her words, “I had always been Miss Cooperation and bent over backwards to please. However, by not making demands, I allowed myself to miss out on the financial rewards.”<sup>39</sup> Fortunately, Rogers’ efforts paid off and by 1941 she was the highest paid female performer in Hollywood earning around \$355,000 a year.<sup>40</sup>

A complete list of filmed dance numbers I’d recommend viewing can be found in Appendix A. Now we will look further in depth at two of Rogers’ dance numbers with Astaire, beginning with “Isn’t This a Lovely Day (to be Caught in the Rain)” from *Top Hat* (1935). For context, in this number Astaire’s character is attempting to charm Rogers’ character after they are forced to take cover in a gazebo when it begins raining. The first few minutes consist of Astaire singing Irving Berlin’s “Isn’t This a Lovely Day” to Rogers as she studiously ignores him. Astaire begins circling the gazebo whistling, the tune of which Rogers repeats with a roll of her eyes. She then stands and mimics

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<sup>38</sup> Rogers, Ginger. *Ginger: My Story*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991. 198. Print.

<sup>39</sup> Rogers, Ginger. *Ginger: My Story*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991. 160. Print.

<sup>40</sup> “Ginger Rogers dies.” *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, LLC, 2015. Web.



Astaire's movements, capturing his gait and how he carries himself down to the specifics of putting her hands in her pocket when he does. This is further enhanced by Rogers' wardrobe: she is dressed in pants, a vest, plaid sports coat, and jauntily placed hat, giving her a more masculine appearance. They proceed into a call and response tap section, which melds into their moving in tandem side by side. A turn takes them to face each other; Rogers' character seems taken slightly off guard but begins to succumb to Astaire. The next section is essentially partnering without touch: they remain face to face with eyes locked, tapping around the gazebo in formations much like their ballroom duets. A roll of thunder escalates this hesitant duet into a joyful whirl about the gazebo. The tap steps involved within this number are fairly simple for the most part, primarily turning Irish<sup>41</sup> steps, spank step ball changes, and series of steps and *chassés*. Therefore this piece is more about carriage, facings, and the characters and their interplay. Rogers executes these steps in flat tap shoes rather than her usual heels and with a swagger to match Astaire, adding to the masculine feel. The simplicity of the steps is offset by the variety in floor patterns within the confined space of the gazebo and Astaire and Rogers' energy. The number builds to its climax with a roll of thunder at which point the speed and intensity of the music increases, echoed by the dance. Surprised at first by the thunder, Astaire and Rogers make eye contact and smile, bouncing in place for a moment. They continue their touch-free partnering with simple slide steps in a square creating a cat and mouse effect which is made more exciting by their proximity. The climax comes with tandem *tour jetés* after which the pair finally makes full body contact. Throughout the

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<sup>41</sup> See glossary and video

number Rogers' icy composure has slowly melted and she is fully won over by the final moment, at which point Astaire and Rogers break out laughing. The footwork and timing is imperfect but the viewer does not notice the mistakes in the steps as the focus is on the interaction of the characters. In fact, the imperfections add to the appeal as it makes the scene appear more natural. This number is a good example of the character Rogers typically played in Astaire and Rogers films, and how their chemistry made the partnership work. Rogers stands out in this number for her imitation of Astaire. This is a departure from many of her other numbers in which she is clad in heeled taps and flowing dresses, playing the part of the traditional feminine ingénue. Astaire-Rogers duets are often one of two main styles, showcasing the "multifaceted nature" that was Rogers' appeal: the fun, typically tap number where Rogers wears pants or a shorter skirt and the dramatic, romantic ballroom numbers with Rogers in a fabulous evening gown.<sup>42</sup> The former often has a teasing quality, shown here with Rogers "shadowing" Astaire's movements, something Rogers came up with herself.<sup>43</sup> These numbers are lighter, often comedic, with faster, exciting music and steps. Their characters, and perhaps Rogers and Astaire themselves, compete a bit, shown here in the first call and response where Rogers adds on to Astaire's initial step sequence. The joy this piece gives the audience really lies in the performers' energy. Astaire and Rogers look like they are having fun with one another; the low bounce in their step, smiles, and eye contact in the section following the thunderclap to the end truly makes the number. Rogers also contributed ideas and

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<sup>42</sup> Kaufman, Sarah. "Ginger Rogers, consistently leading." *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 13 Feb. 2011. *ProQuest*. Web.

<sup>43</sup> Rogers, Ginger. *Ginger: My Story*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991. 139-140. Print.

choreography to many of her numbers with Astaire, including this one. In her autobiography she states, “I had plenty of input in our routines and got to be known as the ‘button finder.’ In show business parlance, that means the one who puts the last word or the finishing touch on a scene.”<sup>44</sup> She was the one who came up with the idea of jumping outside the gazebo to feel the raindrops then retreating back in and sitting on cross legged on the edge to end “Isn’t This A Lovely Day (to be Caught in the Rain).”

Another important duet where “Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers set the benchmark for the special chemistry that can be generated from the couple dance [is] in Cole Porter’s ‘Night and Day’ from *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), a remake of the 1932 stage show *Gay Divorce*. This number established new standards of direction, design, choreography, camerawork and editing, not just for the team’s subsequent dances, but for many other couples as well.”<sup>45</sup> “Night and Day” starts with Astaire serenading a resistant Rogers, once again. A small, somewhat sad smile plays at Rogers’ lips as Astaire declares his love for her on a balcony overlooking a body of water. Catching herself, Rogers wipes the smile from her face and escapes inside, only to find Astaire blocking her path every way she turns. He catches her hand as she walks away and spins her into him. The two start a small waltzing duet, Rogers’ gown floating about her, enhancing every turn she makes. Astaire spins Rogers out of their ballroom hold and in so that they are connected side by side, their faces turned in to one another, foreheads nearly touching. They begin softly tapping, maintaining the fluid, floating quality of the music.

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<sup>44</sup> Rogers, Ginger. *Ginger: My Story*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991. 139-140. Print.

<sup>45</sup> Wood, Graham. “Why do they start to sing and dance all of a sudden? Examining the film musical.” *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*. Eds. Everett, William A., and Paul R. Laird. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 305-324. Print.

A turn brings them back face to face and slows the characters' movements as they gaze in one another's eyes. Another brief ballroom whirl and tap break later, Rogers again breaks from Astaire and tries to stalk away, but Astaire catches her. He pulls her to him but quickly lets go, whirling backwards, the character tripping as though he's lost his balance at the sight of her. Astaire goes to where Rogers stands on the balcony and leads her down a few steps into a ballroom hold. They *chassé* across the floor and Rogers *tour jetés* as Astaire helps lift her. He leads her to the center of the room and a tap step call and response brings them back to ballroom. The music picks up in tempo and volume as the pair whirls about cheek to cheek, at first slower than the music but increasing the speed and intensity as they go. Astaire and Rogers end in a beautiful dip where Rogers leans with a hand on a seat, Astaire above her, creating a romantic tableau.

This number is a nice example of the importance of Rogers' costumes. Turns are prevalent in "Night & Day" and the motion of Rogers' dress as it billows around her enhances the dancing. Without her dress, the dance would not have been as visually appealing and the repetition of steps and turns may have bored the audience. Looking at the movement, Rogers' dance technique was imperfect and less precise than the other two dancers we'll discuss. For example, her *port de bras* lacks the dancer's line and proper hand position. This can be seen on her spins out from Astaire in "Night and Day," where her extended arm throws her form out of alignment. It is a small detail, and one most viewers would not notice, but it lacks the precision a trained ballerina might employ. That is not to say Rogers isn't a strong dancer. These tiny imperfections add a more natural, in the moment feel to her performances. You don't see the hours and hours of rehearsals

when Rogers performs with Astaire; you just see the two characters' truthful communication through movement. In the words of John Kobal, "Ginger was Fred's most perfect partner, following him exactly, dancing almost like another man; his shadow rather than his 'prima ballerina.' She was a clever faker; when she danced with Astaire, one looked at her face for reactions, instead of her feet."<sup>46</sup> This is the basis of Rogers' performances: what she lacks in technique she makes up for with acting. The connection between her and Astaire is the focus, the steps are simply icing on the cake.

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<sup>46</sup> Kobal, John. *Gotta Sing, Gotta Dance: A Pictorial History of Film Musicals*. New York: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited, 1971. 139. Print.

## CHAPTER 3

### VERA-ELLEN

Vera-Ellen Westmeier Rohe was born February 16, 1921 in Norwood, Ohio. This birthdate was not the one typically advertised throughout her career, as she shaved five years off her age when she transitioned to film in order to create the image of a precocious teenage prodigy. Very small for her age, she began dancing at age 9 as a way to become stronger and improve her body's health. Vera-Ellen's career began when she won the *Major Bowes' Amateur Hour* at age 13 and toured with his variety shows. After touring she moved to New York with her mother Alma Rohe, who was very influential in Vera-Ellen's life. There she took classes in tap, ballet, and body conditioning and began auditioning for Broadway shows. She had difficulty booking those auditions, apparently not due to her talent but rather her height. At the time Vera-Ellen was only 4'6" and under 80 pounds making her stand out in a negative way from the other girls auditioning.<sup>47</sup> This led her to create body exercises in an effort to increase her height, which was the start of a life-long obsession with controlling the shape of her body through diet and exercise. Through some means, natural or otherwise, Vera-Ellen did grow to a respectable 5'4".

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<sup>47</sup> Soren, David. *Vera-Ellen: The Magic and the Mystery*. Baltimore: Luminary Press, 1999. 27. Print.

Her first New York booking came in 1938 with the specialty number “Little Nellie Kelly” at Billy Rose’s Casa Manana nightclub. She then made her Broadway debut in 1939 at the age of 18 in the short-lived *Very Warm for May*. One of her gigs was as part of the Radio City Rockettes, where she was the youngest and one of the shortest chorus girls. For reference, the current height requirement for Rockettes is 5’6” to 5’10.5”.<sup>48</sup> Precision drill work was not for Vera-Ellen, as she kicked higher than the other girls in the line and was more interested in specialty solo work than ensemble roles. She went on to book more Broadway shows: *Higher and Higher* (1940), *Panama Hattie* (1940), *By Jupiter* (1942), and *A Connecticut Yankee* (1943).<sup>49</sup> Vera-Ellen had featured roles in the latter two which led to mentions in the press and ultimately to her entrance into Hollywood. In 1944 she was named one of the four new female show-stoppers on Broadway by *Look Magazine*, who wrote “Vera-Ellen is what makes the box-office cash register sing a golden tune...one of the major reasons why *Connecticut Yankee* is a hit. Vera is essentially a dancer with a strong sense of comedy...she sings and acts; what she lacks in professional experience she makes up for in pert charm.”<sup>50</sup> She then won the Donaldson Award for Best Supporting Actress in a Broadway production, after which Samuel Goldwyn offered Vera-Ellen a film contract.<sup>51</sup>

Vera-Ellen’s first film was *Wonder Man* with Danny Kaye in 1945. Though she was 24 at the time, the studio decided to shave five years off her age to create a youthful image. They also insisted on dubbing her singing even though her voice had been good

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<sup>48</sup> “FAQ.” *Rockettes*. MSG Sports & Entertainment, LLC., 2015. Web.

<sup>49</sup> “Vera-Ellen.” *IBDb*. The Broadway League, 2015. Web.

<sup>50</sup> Soren, David. *Vera-Ellen: The Magic and the Mystery*. Baltimore: Luminary Press, 1999. 44. Print.

<sup>51</sup> Soren, David. *Vera-Ellen: The Magic and the Mystery*. Baltimore: Luminary Press, 1999. 44. Print.

enough for solo roles on Broadway. With her slightly round baby face and adjusted age, Vera-Ellen was initially cast in innocent roles like the kid sister. This changed when she worked with Gene Kelly on the “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue” number in *Words and Music* (1948). Kelly “sought to revamp her look and image and contributed to her education by teaching her to exemplify what she called ‘a sort of earthy, sexy quality – toward modern.’”<sup>52</sup> Vera-Ellen reinvented her screen and public persona, physical appearance, and expanded her dance styles throughout her career. At this point, Vera-Ellen’s sultrier, more glamorous side began to appear, leading to an increase in her popularity and film opportunities. She signed a contract with MGM in 1949 and made another film with Kelly, *On the Town*.

Vera-Ellen first co-starred with Astaire in *Three Little Words* (1950). In her words, they “got on famously and from him I got the high hat and exhibition ballroom stuff.”<sup>53</sup> The two were well-matched and many critics considered Vera-Ellen to be the best partner Astaire had since Rogers and “the most agile and versatile partner that Astaire has teamed with in many years.”<sup>54</sup> Her popularity was reaching all time highs at this point as she was named among the top twelve most admired people in the history of the world by a *Life Magazine* poll in 1950.<sup>55</sup> Vera-Ellen and Astaire worked together a second time in *The Belle of New York* (1952), which was a critical flop. It took \$2.6 million and four months to make but grossed under \$2 million at the box office, making it

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<sup>52</sup> Soren, David. *Vera-Ellen: The Magic and the Mystery*. Baltimore: Luminary Press, 1999. 79. Print.

<sup>53</sup> Hopper, Hedda. “Sprightly Vera-Ellen Travels Fast Pace to Keep Her Energy: Vera-Ellen Invigorated by Fatigue.” *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, 5 Jul. 1953. *ProQuest*. Web.

<sup>54</sup> Levinson, Peter J. *Puttin’ On the Ritz*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2009. 168. Print.

<sup>55</sup> Soren, David. *Vera-Ellen: The Magic and the Mystery*. Baltimore: Luminary Press, 1999. 97. Print.



the first Astaire film to lose money.<sup>56</sup> Astaire was shocked and angry by this turn of events “because *The Belle of New York* was one of [his] favorite films.”<sup>57</sup> The failure is attributed primarily to a weak plot, and the difference in ages and lack of chemistry between Astaire and Vera-Ellen. Still the pair’s execution of Robert Alton’s choreography was praised by critics, with many once again complimenting Vera-Ellen’s versatility and sheer dancing talent. Unfortunately the film’s failure ended Vera-Ellen and Astaire’s partnership and set Vera-Ellen’s career back.

Vera-Ellen’s second to last and possibly most memorable film was *White Christmas* (1954) which reunited her with Danny Kaye. It has become a holiday classic and was my, and many others no doubt, first introduction to Vera-Ellen. The film also features Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney, who played Vera-Ellen’s screen sister. Vera-Ellen was the least famous of the quartet but certainly the strongest and most versatile dancer, something the film capitalized on with multiple dance numbers in a variety of styles featuring Vera-Ellen. When her contract ran out in 1955, Vera-Ellen left MGM following *White Christmas* and developed a Las Vegas act, which opened at the Dunes Hotel in May of 1955. After its closing, she returned to Hollywood for her final film *Let’s Be Happy* (1956) with Tony Martin.

Besides several live television appearances, Vera-Ellen retired from performing in the late 1950s. In terms of Vera-Ellen’s life outside of her career, her story was full of obstacles, both internal and external. She married fellow performer Robert Hightower,

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<sup>56</sup> Soren, David. *Vera-Ellen: The Magic and the Mystery*. Baltimore: Luminary Press, 1999. 115. Print.

<sup>57</sup> Soren, David. *Vera-Ellen: The Magic and the Mystery*. Baltimore: Luminary Press, 1999. 116. Print.

whom she'd met working on *Higher and Higher*, in 1941 when she was 19. They divorced in 1946. Her second marriage was to Victor Rothschild in 1954; they divorced in 1966. In 1963 Vera-Ellen gave birth to a daughter, Victoria Ellen, who died three months later likely from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).<sup>58</sup> This was a traumatic loss for Vera-Ellen and contributed to the dissolution of her marriage. After this she withdrew from the public eye. She did not perform again though she continued taking dance classes until her death from cancer on August 30, 1981 at age 60.

Vera-Ellen struggled with eating disorders which contributed to her deterioration later in life. She was known for her tiny waist, something that was a result of extreme diet and exercise. Thanks to her childhood belief that she could make herself grow through exercise, coupled with her mother's obsession with diets and Vera-Ellen's own perfectionist nature, controlling her physical appearance and abilities grew into an obsession. She took critiques of her appearance seriously, adjusting her image and fashion to please the media. In 1952, Mike Connolly of the *Hollywood Reporter* wrote that Vera-Ellen should be awarded a special Oscar for being the "worst dressed off-screen actress in Hollywood."<sup>59</sup> She responded by ditching her ribbons, ruffles, and excessive jewelry in favor of simpler, more elegant dresses and heels, stating that "I've discovered it's important to spend time on your looks rather than concentrating strictly on your talents."<sup>60</sup> This is still an issue for women today. A woman's appearance is given more consideration than her work, no matter how brilliant she may be. This pressure from

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<sup>58</sup> Soren, David. *Vera-Ellen: The Magic and the Mystery*. Baltimore: Luminary Press, 1999. 174. Print.

<sup>59</sup> Soren, David. *Vera-Ellen: The Magic and the Mystery*. Baltimore: Luminary Press, 1999. 107. Print.

<sup>60</sup> Soren, David. *Vera-Ellen: The Magic and the Mystery*. Baltimore: Luminary Press, 1999. 107. Print.

the media and from the film studios contributed to her obsession with being slim. She hovered around 90 to 110 pounds during her Hollywood career, a weight maintained through strict diets of meat and fruit and constant exercise. Her highest weight was around 111 pounds during her first few films, at which point she was considered pudgy with round cheeks, despite technically being underweight for her height. Vera-Ellen most likely suffered from anorexia nervosa, a “serious, potentially life-threatening eating disorder characterized by self-starvation and excessive weight loss.”<sup>61</sup> Symptoms exhibited by Vera-Ellen include dramatic weight loss, a preoccupation with weight and dieting, anxiety about being “fat”, rigid exercise regimens, and withdrawal from usual friends and activities. Anorexia nervosa can cause osteoporosis, muscle loss, fatigue, and premature aging. At the time the illness was not commonly diagnosed or treated. After dancing with this condition for thirty plus years, Vera-Ellen began to visibly age faster and struggled with serious arthritis. She was in a great deal of physical, mental, and emotional pain during the last two decades of her life.

Vera-Ellen was the most versatile dance partner Astaire had. The “meticulous and flowing complexity of Vera-Ellen’s routines...rivalled and, to some observers, surpassed the talent of Fred Astaire.”<sup>62</sup> She excelled at pretty much every style of dance and was a virtuosic tapper. Many of her numbers featured *nerve tapping*, a series of very rapid toe or heel taps. She was an extremely energetic and athletic performer, incorporating all sorts of acrobatics and fast paced movement into her dance numbers, all performed with a

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<sup>61</sup> “Anorexia Nervosa.” *National Eating Disorders Association*. NEDA, n.d. Web.

<sup>62</sup> Soren, David. *Vera-Ellen: The Magic and the Mystery*. Baltimore: Luminary Press, 1999. 56. Print.

smile on her face and no indication that she was out of breath. This is especially impressive given her poor diet and health. Her perfectionist attitude and precision rivaled even Astaire and Kelly. And yet she is one of the most unrecognized and underappreciated due to her short career.

“Mr. and Mrs. Hooper at Home” from *Three Little Words* (1950) is a high-energy narrative dance featuring Astaire and Vera-Ellen as a married couple dancing through their evening routine. It is performed in what appears to be a sitting room with blue walls and green-yellow accents. Moving from the viewer’s left to right, there is a door, side table, full-length mirror, dinner table set with the necessities, a standing lamp, a small table with an old fashioned telephone on it, and an armchair. Vera-Ellen begins the number perched on the chair, where she checks her watch. Kicking her legs with excitement, she executes a front walkover and runs to peer outside through a window next to the door. She *chassés* and *sautés* away from the window and around the room, dusting the lamp, twirling out of her apron, and landing at the mirror where she primps her hair. A *sauté arabesque* brings her to the door and she opens it for Astaire to enter, who offers Vera-Ellen a bouquet of flowers. They skip side to side as Vera-Ellen smells the flowers and Astaire tosses off his hat before waltzing to the center of the room. Vera-Ellen performs several rapid *battements* from *passé* then whirls out of his arms. Astaire unfolds a newspaper; Vera-Ellen takes it from him, rolls it up, and whacks him over the head. Astaire falls backward into her arms and she drags him to the chair. There the telephone rings and the music takes on a new sultrier rhythm. Astaire answers the telephone and taps his feet as he listens. Vera-Ellen *penchée arabesques* over the side of

the chair to listen in on the call. Astaire stands, shaking his head, intensely focused on the conversation; he ignore Vera-Ellen as she sidles up to him, steps on the receiver, and ends the call. This leads to an argument through tap dance. Vera-Ellen slaps Astaire and marches away with an indignant expression and her hands on her hips. Astaire follows her and they begin to tap furiously with plenty of head shaking and hand throwing. Vera-Ellen “stomps” on his foot and walks away into a lunge with her head on her arm, seemingly distraught. Astaire pleads with her while she covers her ears on *relevé*. Vera-Ellen collapses into the chair as the music changes and slows. Astaire grabs her hand and pulls her up and past him into a bend back on *relevé*, then against his chest. She *chaîné* turns into a very low *tendu* dip with Astaire. The two lift each other into *tour jetés* in a circle. Astaire helps Vera-Ellen into her chair at the dinner table and leaps across the front of the table to sit in his, their dispute settled. The music picks back up as they tap while seated; they proceed to tap through dinner. In a prop heavy section, Vera serves Astaire the imaginary dinner, hitting the toaster so that a piece of toast flies into his hand and sliding a mug across the table to him. Astaire catches it and switches the mug between his hands, as though it were hot. Vera-Ellen throws him a sugar cube which he catches in the mug. They pretend to eat, using their silverware and plates as percussion instruments. The pair spin from their chairs and empty the contents of the table into a drawer; they kick the drawer closed and use the chairs to step onto the table. They tap in tandem on the table and jump off, whirling to the camera in a sequence reminiscent of “Moses Supposes” from *Singin’ in the Rain*. The music fades out as they tap in the silence, their steps perfectly in sync. The music re-enters and they whirl over to a

previously unseen section of the room where a baby sleeps. Vera-Ellen kicks the bassinet and a baby doll pops out into their arms. They swing the baby about, treating it like a football which they pass between one another before returning it to the bassinet. Vera-Ellen *penchés* over the cradle to kiss the baby goodnight. The pair begin a carefree waltz around the room to the door with Astaire lifting Vera-Ellen in a *tour jeté* over each piece of furniture. Vera-Ellen tosses Astaire his hat and one end of her scarf, who uses it to spin her into his arms. Fast ballroom turns take them crashing out through the paper wall of the room, finishing the number with a bang.

As John Mueller wrote, “Vera-Ellen is the partner in the post-Rogers years who most stimulated Astaire’s choreographic genius...she seems capable of doing anything Astaire chooses to dream up.”<sup>63</sup> This very creative parody of domestic life demonstrates just that and showcases Vera-Ellen’s abilities as a comedic dancer. She switches seamlessly between dance styles with the music changes, demonstrating strong ballet technique and tapping skills. Precision is a necessity in such a prop heavy dance and neither Vera-Ellen nor Astaire falter in this regard. They are perfectly in sync during the unaccompanied tap break, moving together to sound like one dancer, which is no easy feat with those steps at that speed. It is here that we see what well-matched perfectionists Astaire and Vera-Ellen were. It is a pity that *The Belle of New York*’s failure prevented further collaboration between them.

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<sup>63</sup> Soren, David. *Vera-Ellen: The Magic and the Mystery*. Baltimore: Luminary Press, 1999. 119. Print.

“So in Love” from *Wonder Man* (1945) features Vera-Ellen as Midge Mallon, a performer at her boyfriend’s nightclub. The number opens on a stage with a backdrop labeled the “Garden of Love” with Vera-Ellen’s character singing about love troubles, though her voice was actually dubbed by June Hutton. Seeking some advice to the lovelorn, she tap dances through a doorway to reveal a chorus of women on pedestals, with multicolored gowns blown by a wind machine. Vera-Ellen runs to the center of their semicircle to listen to each woman’s advice. The chorus suggests she flirt with other guys to win her man’s attention. At that, Vera-Ellen, dressed in a red cropped top, short white skirt with hearts around the waist, and red flats, begins an energetic and acrobatic tap dance. A wide smile plastered on her face, she lunges side to side looking around, presumably for other fellows, then hits a pose and tosses her hair. A few fast-paced tap steps and *grand battement* later, a male dancer dressed in blue and yellow jumps onstage beside Vera-Ellen. The two begin a jazzier section of stylized walks and a tuck jump into lunges. Vera-Ellen tap dances around the man and goes into a series of *fouettés en tournant* with high *battements devant* over the man’s head before stepping on his back into a *grand jeté* over him. Another male dancer appears and the trio breaks into an acrobatic section with partnered cartwheels, a lift where Vera-Ellen is thrown, turns mid-air and lands in a fish dive, and a slide taken from swing dancing. The men disappear and Vera-Ellen begins a quick tap solo onto a series of raised platforms, between which she jumps and cartwheels. The most impressive tap dancing occurs on this platform with a series of *bouffée* turns *en pointe* and nerve tapping accompanied by shoulder shrugs, head shakes, and some cheeky looks. Vera-Ellen then jumps off the platform into one of

the male dancer's arms before flipping out into a series of partnered *tour jetés* and *fouettés* with the male corps. The men lay down on the floor as Vera-Ellen *jetés* over them toward the camera. She finishes the number with nine jumping *fouetté* turns, then runs up the staircase formed by the backs of the male corps, ending with an *arabesque penchée* on the final man's shoulder.

This number, from her very first film, is a six and a half minute non-stop tour de force shot in one take. Vera-Ellen manages to perform it with high energy and a smile plastered on her face, making even the most difficult steps appear effortless. Director George Sidney felt that Vera-Ellen "was not that proficient but was rather a trickster."<sup>64</sup> While I disagree with his assessment of her proficiency, most of Vera-Ellen's early work is very showy and full of trick steps. While she performed well in numbers that required more subtlety and variety in her acting, such as "Naughty But Nice" in *The Belle of New York*, it took her time to cultivate this more glamorous image and performance style. Still, Vera-Ellen's tricks are exciting and impressive to watch. Her acrobatic skill and sheer energy are unmatched. It is a shame that she made only fourteen films before retiring as I believe Vera-Ellen would have reached new heights had she been given the opportunities, free from the many personal and professional obstacles that hindered her. Her struggles are also an important lesson in how the pressures women in the spotlight face can destroy both their careers and their lives.

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<sup>64</sup> Soren, David. *Vera-Ellen: The Magic and the Mystery*. Baltimore: Luminary Press, 1999. 77. Print.



## CHAPTER 4

### CYD CHARISSE

The woman who eventually became Cyd Charisse was born Tula Ellice Finklea on March 8, 1921 or 1922 in Texas. She began dancing at age 6 to strengthen her body after a mild case of polio as a child. She trained professionally in California as a teenager. This led to her touring with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo under the names Felia Sidorova and Maria Istomina, during which she met fellow dancer Nico Charisse.<sup>65</sup> They married in 1939 and had a son, Nicky, in 1942.<sup>66</sup> The pair divorced in 1947. Charisse's second marriage was to singer Tony Martin in 1948, with whom she also had a son, Tony Jr., in 1950.

As World War II caused the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo troupe to break up, Charisse returned to California and started her career in Hollywood. Her film debut under the name Lily Norwood came in 1943 in *Something to Shout About*.<sup>67</sup> *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946) was the first film done under the name Cyd Charisse, "Cyd" coming from a childhood nickname for "sis." It was also the film where she met Astaire, who was starring, and performed a brief routine with him. She was offered the lead in *An*

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<sup>65</sup> "Cyd Charisse dies." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, LLC, 2015. Web.

<sup>66</sup> Berkvist, Robert. "Cyd Charisse, 86, Silken Dancer of Movies, Dies." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 18 Jun. 2008. Web.

<sup>67</sup> "Cyd Charisse." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, Inc., 2015. Web.

*American in Paris*, which might have made her a star, but had to decline due to pregnancy. The role went to Leslie Caron, instead, a French actress and dancer who also worked with Astaire on *Daddy Long Legs* (1955).

However, Charisse's breakthrough role came a year later with *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) where she danced opposite Gene Kelly in the "Broadway Ballet." She worked with Kelly again on *Brigadoon* (1954) and *It's Always Fair Weather* (1955). Besides the bit part in *Ziegfeld Follies*, Charisse co-starred with Astaire in *The Band Wagon* (1953) and *Silk Stockings* (1957). Movie musicals declined and essentially disappeared by the end of the 1950s, but Charisse continued to book roles in television and film. Her IMDB credits her with 55 acting roles, about half of which were not musical roles. Her final television appearance was *Empire State Building Murders* in 2008, which starred a number of famous film actors from the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>68</sup> Charisse performed an act with husband Tony Martin in various nightclubs and on television. She performed in several stage shows, including *Charlie Girl* on London's West End in 1986, and made her Broadway debut late in life at age 70 in the Tommy Tune musical *Grand Hotel*. In 2006, Charisse was awarded the National Medal of the Arts and Humanities, the highest award for arts in the United States.<sup>69</sup> She suffered from arthritis as she grew older from the many years of dancing and ultimately died of a heart attack on June 17, 2008 at age 86.

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<sup>68</sup> "Cynd Charisse." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, Inc., 2015. Web.

<sup>69</sup> Trescott, Jacqueline. "White House Honors Performers, Scholars." *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 9 Nov. 2006. Web.

According to Kevin Kelly, “Although Cyd Charisse was popular (and with classical "class"), she never really attained the glowing star-billing other dancers struck from their association with Astaire... One of the reasons is, I think, that Cyd Charisse always seemed tall for Astaire, linearly superior. Their physical match wasn't flawless, discourtesy, perhaps, of a non-dancing God.”<sup>70</sup> While Charisse was not exceptionally tall, standing a respectable 5'6" or 5'7", Astaire's other partners such as Rogers and Vera-Allen had more diminutive 5'4" frames. Astaire nearly did not partner with Charisse due to this as he stood only two inches taller at 5'9". It is probably not a coincidence that in their numbers like “Dancing in the Dark,” Charisse appears in flats, not heels. Charisse's height was enhanced by her mythical long legs, supposedly insured for millions by Lloyds of London while she with MGM. She was the first woman elected to the Hall of Fame For Famous Legs.<sup>71</sup>

Cyd Charisse is perhaps most well-known for these “million dollar legs” and her beauty and sex appeal, which is unfortunate as it ignores her wide character range and abilities. Charisse was a stronger dancer than Rogers, due in part to her extensive ballet training. However, unlike most of Astaire's partners, she was not a tapper. Instead her duets with Astaire were mainly based in ballet, ballroom, and her own unique sultry jazz style, a “mix of sex and poise.”<sup>72</sup> She was known for her leg extensions, precision, and expressive performance style. Her dance sequence “Dancing in the Dark” in *Band Wagon*

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<sup>70</sup> Kelly, Kevin. “All I Ever Wanted to Do Was Dance, Says Cyd Charisse.” *The Boston Globe*. The Boston Globe, 25 Mar. 1980. *ProQuest*. Web.

<sup>71</sup> “BRIEFLY Cyd Charisse honored for legs.” *The Globe and Mail*. The Globe and Mail, 19 Sep. 1980. *ProQuest*. Web.

<sup>72</sup> Burr, Ty. “Appreciation: From ballet to movies, Cyd Charisse was a cool classic.” *The Boston Globe*. The Boston Globe, 19 Jun. 2008. *ProQuest*. Web.

with Astaire was considered “the best dance number in any movie musical” by Gene Kelly.<sup>73</sup> Charisse was the strongest ballerina Astaire partnered due to her time with the Ballet Russe. She had a reputation for being a graceful and reliable performer and both Kelly and Astaire had kind things to say about her as a partner, the latter calling her “beautiful dynamite.”<sup>74</sup>

In spite of the rave reviews Charisse received for her dancing, her “simply peerless performance[s]” were not enough for critics.<sup>75</sup> Many articles, including several obituaries, focus on her “toneless voice” and weaknesses as a singer and actress.<sup>76</sup> She was certainly not a singer and in all her musical roles, her voice is dubbed. Of the three partners this paper discusses, I would consider Charisse the weakest actress, but acting does not pertain solely to the delivery of dialogue. Rather, Charisse’s acting skills are evident within her movement. While by no means an accomplished straight actress,<sup>77</sup> when dancing Charisse was in her element and could commit fully to the characters and their emotions. She believed that “dancing is not about abstract movement but about characterization...in all my dancing I play a role. To me, that’s what dancing is about. It’s not just steps.”<sup>78</sup> Famous dancers Chita Rivera and Ann Reinking regarded her as an idol, the former stating “You don’t compare Cyd Charisse with anybody. She was a

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<sup>73</sup> Kaufman, Gerald. “What Cyd Charisse told me about Singin’ in the Rain.” *The Spectator*. The Spectator (1829) Ltd, 25 Jun. 2008. Web.

<sup>74</sup> Vallance, Tom. “Cyd Charisse: ‘Dynamite’ dancing star in the golden era of Hollywood musicals.” *The Independent*. The Independent, 22 Oct. 2011. Web.

<sup>75</sup> Anonymous. “Cyd Charisse.” *The Times*. The Times, 19 Jun. 2008. *ProQuest*. Web.

<sup>76</sup> Anonymous. “Obituary of Cyd Charrise Dancer whose \$10 million legs enlivened a generation of Hollywood musicals from Singin’ in the Rain to The Band Wagon and Silk Stockings.” *The Daily Telegraph*. The Daily Telegraph, 19 Jun. 2008. *ProQuest*. Web.

<sup>77</sup> “Straight” theatre is a term used for shows that are not musicals

<sup>78</sup> Kisselgoff, Anna. “Cyd Charisse’s Dance Card is Full Once More.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 5 Apr. 1992. *ProQuest*. Web.

dancer. She didn't fool around, she wasn't a stylist or anything like that. . . . She was a completely gifted human being, and so gorgeous you could die.”<sup>79</sup> Therefore, labeling Charisse a dancer is fair; it is the often added qualifier *just* that I find disturbing. People rarely describe someone as *just* a lawyer, *just* a doctor, or even *just* an actor. But “dance has had to fight for pride of place among the arts and in the esteem of the American public.”<sup>80</sup> In the theatre, when you can no longer speak, you sing. And when you can no longer sing, you dance. Dance used to be viewed as decoration or simple entertainment, but in reality it bears “dramatic and theatrical responsibilities equal to the book, lyrics, and music,” and is just as effective a source of dramatic communication.<sup>81</sup> It transcends language and cultural barriers, making dance more effective than words in some ways. Additionally, not everyone can dance at a professional level, as it is physically demanding and requires a great deal of talent and hard work. It therefore escapes me why dancers like Charisse are not held in high regard unless they have some additional skill.

Dance as the deepest form of communication is employed in “Dancing in the Dark” from *The Band Wagon* (1953), which Ann Reinking considered “one complete message, and a very beautiful one, but not a word is spoken. Aside from [Charisse's] unbelievable beauty and technique as a dancer, her heart was in it. . . . Every move means something to her and coincides with the music. She really somehow feels the person she's

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<sup>79</sup> Kaufman, Sarah. “She Put the Move in Movies; Cyd Charisse Danced Rings Around Even the Best.” *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 19 Jun. 2008. *ProQuest*. Web.

<sup>80</sup> Hanna, Judith Lynne. *Dance, Sex, and Gender*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988. Print.

<sup>81</sup> Kislán, Richard. *The Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theater*. New York: Applause, 1995. 236-237. Print.

dancing with, and it affects her movement.”<sup>82</sup> The number begins with Charisse and Astaire, dressed in light colored fabrics to contrast the night, leisurely walking through a crowded party and off on their own into dark Central Park. A *rond de jambe en l’air* into a *chaîné* turn brings Charisse face to face with Astaire, where they slowly sway close to one another without touching. The next footwork consists of simple drags, walks, and ball changes, but the building drama lies in the pair’s connection through constant eye contact and poise. Finally physically partnering to break the tension, Astaire whips Charisse into several *pirouettes* followed by *bourrée* turns with their arms around each other’s waists. They repeat their drag walks, *tendus*, and simple partnering but touching this time, changing their position in relation to one another. An *à la seconde promenade* into a deep lunge brings Charisse into a diagonal with Astaire, a sequence that is repeated later in the number. Charisse stands and floats into graceful turns and drags around Astaire, which bleeds into a smooth lift where both land soundlessly in a crouch looking at one another. They slowly rise, *rond de jambe*, and meld into an intimate position with Astaire pressed just behind and to the viewer’s right of Charisse, his left arm around her waist, her left hand resting on his. Their tempo picks up as Astaire turns Charisse into their *promenade* lunge sequence out of which the pair runs toward the bench. An *attitude* lift blends into two *rond de jambe promenades*, one low in *plié relevé*, the second a high fan kick into a *développé seconde*. In tandem they sway side to side and *chaîné* to the bench where Charisse sits with her upstage leg extended and pointed. Astaire runs around the bench to pull her up into an *arabesque* on top of the bench, out of which she falls into

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<sup>82</sup> Kaufman, Sarah. “She Put the Move in Movies; Cyd Charisse Danced Rings Around Even the Best.” *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 19 Jun. 2008. *ProQuest*. Web.

his arms, turning as she goes to land backwards in his arms. She turns out of his arms then back into a partnered *pirouette* into an *arabesque* and they walk around each other. Charisse brush hops into a back *port de bras*, supported by Astaire. She leans into Astaire in *passé relevé* and turns across him into a dip in *tendu*. They waltz to the viewer's right to *chaîné* up the stairs to the park. After a few final poses at the top, Astaire helps Charisse into a horse drawn carriage and the pair rides off. The number is a smooth mix of ballet and ballroom that appears effortless. Charisse and Astaire show no signs of exertion as they ride off, just a pair of lovers on a nighttime stroll. The sheer beauty of the choreography and the couple's dancing is enough to make this number a classic, but it is taken to another level by the emotion and connection between Charisse and Astaire. Really, Charisse's importance lies in her breathtaking dancing and storytelling through movement. This number is a love story, like many of Astaire's duets, but one accomplished entirely through movement with no song to set the mood, such as in much of his work with Rogers. The romance is also more subtle than in other Astaire numbers. With each movement Astaire and Charisse's characters' relationship begins to change as they fall in love, slowly, softly. There is no dramatic kiss, no overt sign of such a change. Instead it is communicated through the dancers' eyes, the electricity between them, and the way they move together. Charisse is the right partner for such a story.

“Broadway Melody” is the famous section of *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) that really launched Charisse's career. It was her first work with Gene Kelly, the star of the film. Charisse's section of this 13 minute number begins when Kelly's exuberant tap dance is stopped by an extended leg with his hat hanging on the toe of a green heeled

foot. The camera pans up to show a green, sparkling flapper dress on a smoking woman with a black bob. Charisse slowly raises her leg up for Kelly to grab his hat. She quickly switches her *battement*, stands, and turns in *plié* to lead Kelly away. She parades around Kelly seducing him with a low sultry dance, shaking both her bespangled hips and shoulders in a stylized manner. Blowing a ring of smoke in his face, Charisse *battements* around him shimmying into a hip hinge. Standing, she moves her knees side to side with a hand in front of her face in a dance reminiscent of the 1920s Charleston. Her fluidity is punctuated by a hip hit and look to Kelly on a drum beat, to which he reacts. Charisse walks around him to grab his glasses, which she wipes on her leg as he looks away. She walks to where he's facing twirling his glasses, her heels kicking her *derrière* as she parades, and repeats her drum beat hip hit. This knocks Kelly's hat off and as he bends to retrieve it, she kicks it away. She drops his glasses, which she kicks the other way. As Kelly rises, Charisse puts her cigarette holder in his mouth and walks away from him looking at her nails. Kelly grabs her hand and whirls her toward him into double *attitude* lift. They stare into each other's eyes and at one another's lips, both breaking from their initial demeanors: Charisse's cool, haughty expression breaks into a flirtatious smile and Kelly stops resisting. She slides down his body onto the floor. Kelly steps over Charisse and pulls her up into multiple *coupé* turns before catching her in a dip down to the floor. He pulls her back up close to his body and they *plié* hinge together. Kelly spins Charisse out as they pop their knees. Charisse *chassés* into Kelly and wraps her leg around him. Kelly lifts her onto his hip with her bottom leg bent and back leg straight. They are face to face at this point in an almost kiss. Charisse comes down and *développés* her front leg



above Kelly's shoulder; he grabs it and sweeps her around. Charisse drops the position and goes for the kiss but is distracted by her mobster boyfriend's offering of a diamond choker. Abandoning Kelly, Charisse follows the mobster away. Kelly goes to follow but is stopped by the man's lackeys. Charisse's next appearance is a ballet section. Kelly's now successful character appears at a swanky party in a suit where all the guests pause to applaud his entrance. He makes his way across the dance floor, waltzing with several flappers, then turns and sees Charisse in a white satin flapper dress. The crowd freezes as the camera zooms in on Charisse's face, then Kelly's. As it zooms out, there is a shift to a pink dream sequence sunrise, set on an expansive set of wide stairs. Charisse is in a simpler white dress with a billowing 25-ft silk scarf trailing behind her, her shoulder length hair in loose waves, and bare feet. Charisse very slowly and dramatically walks diagonally down the platform stairs toward Kelly, who is clad in a black short-sleeved shirt and pants. She finishes her advance with series of *bourrées* and they put an arm around each other's back to run back up the stairs with silk flying in wind. They turn to face one another, then turn away with Charisse on *relevé*, her arms out. Kelly runs the length of silk and they turn back to face each other. Charisse fan kicks down a stair and *bourrées* backwards toward Kelly. She turns in *attitude* as Kelly goes to knee. She moves up the steps to the other side of Kelly as he stands and they run back towards camera with their arms out. Kelly rolls to sit on a step as Charisse fan kicks over him and then runs around him back up the stairs at a diagonal so the silk embraces Kelly as she goes. Charisse *relevés* in fifth at the top on a cymbal crash and her silk scarf blows straight up, giving her the appearance of an angelic messenger. She again walks slowly down the

stairs to Kelly and steps smoothly into a double stag lift. Charisse *développés* out of it, walks around Kelly to wrap him in her silk, and steps into a cradle lift, nose to nose with Kelly. As Kelly walks with Charisse cradled in his arms, she extends her legs to *tendu* front and *coupé* back. Kelly lowers to his knee with Charisse almost to ground, at which point they finally kiss, both entangled in her silk scarf. Charisse walks back up the stairs, disentangling Milo from the silk and they turn to face each other with arms extended, at which point the dream sequence fades out. Out of the dream world, Kelly runs to Charisse's character and grabs her arm. She gives his offending hand an appraising look, flips the mobster's coin into his hand, and walks away from Kelly.

*Singin' in the Rain* established Charisse's versatility and range of dance styles and characterization. She believably portrays both a vixen and a "virginal goddess" within one number.<sup>83</sup> Her intense ballet training is visible in the precision of her moves and carriage, even as she slinks seductively around Kelly. Charisse's demeanor changes between the two sections through her movements, carriage, and facial expressions. She begins with an aloof and dominant persona, almost challenging Kelly as she holds him in thrall. Once Kelly gives in and pulls her into the double *attitude* lift with their faces inches away from one another, the temperature heats up. The *pas de deux* is sexy, almost scandalous for the time with Charisse's full contact slide down the front of Kelly's body. In the dream sequence, this full contact is absent, replaced by the silk scarf running across Kelly's chest as he opens his arms in rapture. Here Charisse is softer in every way,

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<sup>83</sup> Anonymous. "Obituary of Cyd Charisse Dancer whose \$10 million legs enlivened a generation of Hollywood musicals from *Singin' in the Rain* to *The Band Wagon* and *Silk Stockings*." *The Daily Telegraph*. The Daily Telegraph, 19 Jun. 2008. *ProQuest*. Web.

a smile tugging at her lips. Kelly longs to reach her character in this number, both running, leaning, and reaching to one another with extended arms, yet never really catches her. The movement here provides the narrative, showing what Kelly's character wants but can never have. Charisse is the ideal woman: a mix of sex appeal and class, mistress and goddess, vulnerability and strength.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Besides Rogers, Vera-Ellen, and Charisse, Astaire had a number of both male and female dance partners. Of the women, there are quite a few very recognizable names including Audrey Hepburn (*Funny Face*), Judy Garland (*Easter Parade*), Eleanor Powell (*Broadway Melody of 1940*), Ann Miller (*Easter Parade*), and Leslie Caron (*Daddy Long Legs*). Another notable but less known partner was Barrie Chase, whose amount of dance numbers with Astaire rivals Rogers. Chase was one of Astaire's final partners and danced with him primarily in television specials like *An Evening with Fred Astaire* (1958) rather than in feature films. It was around this time that both the golden age of movie musicals and Astaire's dancing career were coming to an end.

Fred Astaire made many contributions to dance and film. He created a great deal of innovative choreography and his choice of camera angles and shots greatly improved filmed dance. However, the credit for his choreography, style, and bringing dance back into fashion must be shared with his many collaborators. The contributions of Astaire's dance partners, co-choreographers, directors, etc., are all overshadowed by his legacy. Yet, Astaire's work would not have succeeded without others, including Ginger Rogers, Cyd Charisse, and Vera-Ellen. Without smart and talented performers, even the most

genius of choreography would be worth nothing. Therefore Astaire's legacy and the success of movie musicals is thanks in no small part to these women.

Ginger Rogers, apart from helping to make her partnership with Astaire the legacy it has come to be, had stage, television, and film career that lasted six decades. Her quality performances encompassed many genres, from musical comedy to serious dramas. Rogers was an all-American girl, who charmed the public and critics alike. However, she was also an independent career woman who made strides for women in the performing arts. Vera-Ellen's body of work, while limited, includes some of the most outstanding performances of the golden age movie musicals. The best all-around dancer of these women, her tap and acrobatic skills exceeded even Astaire. Cyd Charisse had a long and successful career on stage and screen. She communicated most effectively through dance and was both an exquisite partner and solo dancer. Despite Rogers, Vera-Ellen, and Charisse's contributions, their legacy has not prevailed as Astaire's has, something that needs to be corrected. It is time to put these women back in the narrative; each deserves her place in history.

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## APPENDIX A

### Dance Numbers for Recommended Viewing

#### Ginger Rogers

##### With Fred Astaire:

“The Carioca”	<i>Flying Down to Rio</i>	1933
“Night & Day”	<i>The Gay Divorcee</i>	1934
“Smoke Gets In Your Eyes”	<i>Roberta</i>	1935
“I’ll Be Hard to Handle”	<i>Roberta</i>	1935
“Isn’t This a Lovely Day (to be Caught in the Rain)”	<i>Top Hat</i>	1935
“Cheek to Cheek”	<i>Top Hat</i>	1935
“Pick Yourself Up”	<i>Swing Time</i>	1936
“Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off”	<i>Shall We Dance</i>	1937

##### Other:

“We’re in the Money”	<i>Gold Diggers of 1933</i>	1933
“Let Yourself Go” (solo)	<i>Follow the Fleet</i>	1936

Cyd Charisse

With Fred Astaire:

“Dancing in the Dark”	<i>The Band Wagon</i>	1953
“Girl Hunt Ballet”	<i>The Band Wagon</i>	1953
“All of You”	<i>Silk Stockings</i>	1957

Other:

“Broadway Melody”	<i>Singin’ in the Rain</i>	1952
“The Heather on the Hill”	<i>Brigadoon</i>	1954
“Baby You Knock Me Out”	<i>It’s Always Fair Weather</i>	1955
“Frankie and Johnny”	<i>Meet Me in Las Vegas</i>	1956
“Silk Stockings”	<i>Silk Stockings</i>	1957
Dance Sequences	<i>Party Girl</i>	1958

Vera-Ellen

With Fred Astaire:

“Mr. and Mrs. Hooper at Home”	<i>Three Little Words</i>	1950
“Where Did You Get That Girl?”	<i>Three Little Words</i>	1950
“Baby Doll”	<i>The Belle of New York</i>	1952
“Oops”	<i>The Belle of New York</i>	1952

Other:

“So in Love”	<i>Wonder Man</i>	1945
“Slaughter on Tenth Avenue”	<i>Words and Music</i>	1948
“Miss Turnstiles Ballet”	<i>On the Town</i>	1949
“Naughty But Nice”	<i>The Belle of New York</i>	1952
“Abraham”	<i>White Christmas</i>	1954
“The Best Things Happen While You’re Dancing”	<i>White Christmas</i>	1954

## APPENDIX B

### Dance Terminology Glossary

Visual Glossary Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9TsmoQMgaw>

**À la seconde:** to the second [position]; to the side

**À terre:** on the ground

**Arabesque:** supporting leg straightened with other leg extended behind at right angles to it with hips and shoulders square

**Attitude:** supporting leg straightened with other leg lifted in back, the knee bent at 90 degree angle and turned out so knee is higher than the foot

**Ball change:** change of weight from one foot to the other; typically a connection step

**Baryshnikov leap:** leap into air with front leg straight and back leg in attitude; often has a slide arch to the back

**Bourrée:** series of tiny steps on almost straight legs that make the dancer appear to glide

**Brush:** swing foot forward hitting only the ball tap

**Chaîné:** rapid turn on point or demi-pointe done in straight line or circle; chains, links

**Chassé:** one foot chases the other out of position, done in a series

**Corps [de ballet]:** body; dancers who do not appear as soloists

**Coupé:** also called sur le cou-de-pied meaning on the neck of the foot; working foot placed on part of leg between base of calf and beginning of ankle

**Devant:** in front

**Développé:** working leg drawn up to knee of supporting leg and slowly extended to open position en l'air and held there with hips squared

**En dedans:** inward

**En dehors:** outward

**En l'air:** in the air; off the floor

**En pointe:** also called sur les pointes; raising of the body on the tips of the toes

**En tournant:** turning; body is to turn while executing a given step

**Fan kick:** essentially a large rond de jambe en l'air; leg battements to one corner, then sweeps to the other corner tracing an arc in the air

**Fish dive:** lift where dancer being lifted with one leg extended and the other in passé (often overcrossed) with an arched back

**Fouetté:** whipped; working leg passes rapidly in front or behind supporting foot as body whips the other direction

**Fouetté en tournant:** large turning fouetté done on demi-pointe, point, or with a jump; working leg begins in passé, extends devant as supporting leg pliés, moves à la seconde as supporting leg relevés then into passé as body whips around

**Grand battement:** working leg is raised from the hip into the air and brought down again with both knees straight

**Grand jeté:** large jump where legs are thrown to form a 180 degree line in the air

**Hop:** a jump into the air off one foot that lands on that same foot; no change of weight

**Irish:** shuffle hop step

**Leap:** a push into the air off one foot that lands on the other foot; requires a change of weight

**Nerve tapping:** series of rapid consecutive taps with heel, ball, or toe caused by vibration of the leg; begins from hip and leg is tensed and straight

**Passé:** also called retire; position where thigh raised to second position en l'air with knee bent so pointed toe rests to side of supporting knee

**Penché:** leaning, inclining

**Pirouette:** complete turn of the body on one foot on point or demi-pointe; body centered over straight supporting leg with other leg typically in passé; performed en dedans or en dehors

**Plié:** bend of the knees

**Port de bras:** carriage of the arms; series of movements made by passing arms through various positions

**Promenade:** slow turn in place on one foot by a series of slight movements of the heel while maintaining a pose such as an arabesque or attitude

**Relevé:** raising of body on pointe or demi-pointe

**Rond de jambe:** circular movement of the leg; done à terre or en l'air

**Sauté:** when added to name of the step, movement is performed while jumping

**Shuffle:** brush spank; brush of the toe tap forward and back

**Spank:** swing foot back hitting only the ball tap

**Stag jump:** leap into air with front and back legs in attitude

**Supporting leg:** the leg which supports the body so the working leg is free to execute a given movement

**Tendu:** stretched; working leg brushes through foot to extend à terre straight and pointed and then brushes back toe first to starting position

**Tour jeté:** interlaced jeté; usually preceded by a chassé to prepare for the jump; legs switch mid-air so that the foot that lifts first also lands first

**Tuck jump:** a jump where both knees tuck up to the chest in the air

**Working leg:** the leg that is executing a given movement while the weight of the body is on the supporting leg